

The Folly of Perpetual Victimhood

- Jalees Rehman

I grew up in a culture of guilt. One of the defining characteristics of post-war Germany was the "Vergangenheitsbewältigung", a monstrous German word that describes the attempts to come to terms with the horrors of Nazi-Germany and World War II. How could Germans have abandoned all sense of humanity and decency? Why had millions of German actively or passively engaged in the mass murder of millions of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, socialists and so many other minorities? This Vergangenheitsbewältigung resulted in a deep-rooted sense of collective shame and guilt, one which transcended the generation which had lived through the war and even engulfed Germans born after the war and Germans with immigrant backgrounds, whose families obviously had no historic link to the atrocious crimes committed in Nazi Germany. We did not feel blameworthy in the sense of having to answer for the Nazi crimes, but we did feel that the burden of history had foisted a responsibility on us. We felt that it was our responsibility to be continuously vigilant, watching for any signs or symptoms indicating a recurrence of right-wing extremism, anti-Semitism, fascism, racism, militarism, nationalism, discrimination or other characteristics of Nazi Germany. Our obsession with collective introspection at times became so excessive that it paralyzed us, such as when we developed a general paranoia of expressing any form of German patriotism, because it might set us on a path to Nazism. Many Germans also had near-hysterical responses to any discussions about genetic engineering, because it evoked haunting memories of Nazi eugenics. But despite these irrational excesses, I think that we Germans greatly benefited from our post-war soul-searching which helped us build a mostly peaceful country – no small feat, considering our past.

Roughly one decade ago, "mirror neurons" were among the hottest items in neuroscience research. These neurons in the brain of an individual were thought to fire upon observing behaviors in other individuals: When I see someone eating a delicious piece of chocolate, my mirror neurons fire and help create a proxy sensation or awareness in my brain that mirror the observed behavior so that I might have some sense of eating the chocolate

myself. If this were true, mirror neurons would play a central role in generating a sense of empathy. Newer scientific research has questioned whether "mirror neurons" truly exist, but there is little doubt that our brain has some neurobiological substrate that enables empathy, even if it does not consist of the exact same set of anatomically defined neurons as has been previously suspected. I therefore still like to use the "mirror neurons" metaphor, because it aptly evokes the image of a neurobiological mirror in our mind. I would like to extend that mirror metaphor and also propose that our mind might contain "guilt neurons", which fire when we observe some degree of resemblance between ourselves and perpetrators of crimes. Part of being immersed in the post-war German tradition of collective guilt and soul-searching is that it endowed me with ultra-sensitive hypothetical "guilt neurons". When I hear about a tragedy or crime, I not only feel the natural empathy with the victims, but in a reflex-like manner ask the question whether I bear some degree of responsibility – not blame – for this tragedy and crime and how to best work towards preventing it in the future. This "guilt neuron" activity is strongest when I sense that the perpetrator is a member of an in-group that I also belong to, such as crimes being committed by fathers or husbands, by Germans, by scientists or physicians, by Muslims, by people with a South Asian heritage and so forth.

When Anders Breivik in Norway committed his mass murder in 2011, I felt a very deep sadness, because I could really empathize with the victims and their families. He killed teenagers and young adults attending a youth camp of the Social Democratic party. His victims could have been my children, and a couple of decades ago, I might have attended a similar youth camp in Germany. My guilt neurons were silent – I did not feel much of a responsibility because I had little to nothing in common with the perpetrator. He despised everything that I supported – diversity, feminism, progressive-liberal thought and the environmental movement. But I felt that there were people who ought to have felt some degree of responsibility. His manifesto quoted extensively from far-right bloggers and authors in the United States and in Europe, who seemed to have shared his world-views. Does this mean that everyone promoting anti-immigrant or far-right views in Europe and the US should have been blamed for the deeds this mass killer? Of course not! They did not directly provide him with the weapons and they did not ask him to murder the social democratic youth – but shouldn't one take some responsibility for promoting hateful messages that denigrated immigrants, Muslims and citizens with progressive-liberal thoughts? The responses of the far-right politicians and authors who might have unwittingly influenced Breivik were quite disappointing. Instead of undergoing an introspective analysis, the far right just issued perfunctory condemnations, stating that they would never have endorsed the murders. The

politicians and far right bloggers continued to engage in their hateful rhetoric, even tried to seize the opportunity to portray themselves as unfairly maligned victims. The Breivik acts of terror did not seem to have activated the "guilt neurons" of the far right.

The week following the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, 2013 was a very sad week for me. Boston is one of my most favorite cities in the world. It is the first US city that I ever visited. I spent many months there when I was a student in the 1990s. Boston eased me into American culture by cushioning the culture shock that Europeans experience when they first visit the US, mostly because it reminded me a lot of my home town Munich, famously known as the "Weltstadt mit Herz" ("city of the world with a heart"). Like Munich, Boston is wonderfully suited for long city walks. The Bostonians were extremely hospitable and friendly. I remember seeing beautiful sunsets in Boston, spending hours in the wonderful bookstores in Cambridge and Boston and being thrilled by the plethora of universities and their libraries in the Boston area, which seemed like an endless treasure trove of knowledge. I was thus devastated when I saw the tragedy of the bombings unfold – more or less live on the Internet and on Twitter revealing painful descriptions of victims who had lost their limbs at a marathon. I was haunted by the image of the young boy Martin Richard holding up a sign which said "No more hurting people" in 2012 – only to be murdered in the subsequent year at the Boston Marathon bombings. The idea of this beautiful city, normally bustling with activity and creativity, being forced into a lockdown because of some psychopathic killers was heartbreaking.

On Friday morning, I heard the news that the perpetrators had been identified; two Muslim immigrants with Chechen origins. They were brothers, the older one - 26 year old Tamerlan Tsarnaev - had been killed in a shoot-out. The younger one - 19 year old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev - had not yet been captured and an ongoing manhunt was still paralyzing the city of Boston. There were vague reports of "Islamist connections" of the older brother based on his alleged Youtube video playlists. The younger brother was a college student at the University of Massachusetts and had a Twitter account with the handle @J_tsar, from which he had sent his last tweet on April 17, two days after the Boston Marathon bombing. His last tweet was a re-tweet of the conservative Muslim cleric, Mufti Ismail Menk: "Attitude can take away your beauty no matter how good looking you are or it could enhance your beauty, making you adorable." Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's last self-authored tweet was "I'm a stress free kind of guy", one day after the bombing – both tweets seem rather cynical in the context of someone who had helped inflict so much suffering. His Twitter feed of the past months was a combination of mindless blather, evoking the traditional cliché of the banality of evil, but

it also contained a number of tweets which indicated that he saw himself as a Muslim, even quipping about how Muslims at his mosque thought he was a convert to Islam instead of being born a Muslim.

The specific motives of the two brothers were not yet known when the news broke. Did they murder and maim their fellow citizens because they felt it was consistent with or even mandated by their view of Islam? Was it a political statement regarding the war in Chechnya and they just happened to choose innocent civilian targets in Boston because it was easier than planting bombs in Chechnya or Russia? Were they psychopaths seeking notoriety and infamy without any specific religious or political goals? Were they aided by a terrorist organization or acting as individuals?

Multiple Muslim organizations and prominent Muslims strongly condemned the Boston Marathon bombings, expressed their condolences for the victims and made it very clear that such acts of terror were inconsistent with Islam. Muslim organizations routinely issue such statements when Muslims commit acts of terror, but the question remains whether such statements are enough. Since I possess overactive German guilt neurons, I feel that as members of the Muslim community in the US, we have a deeper responsibility to undertake an introspective analysis and explore why US Muslims engage in forms of violence. Some might argue that there is no need for such introspection, since we do not yet know whether the motives of the Tsarnaev brothers were in any way linked to Islam. Even apart from the Tsarnaev brothers' motives, US Muslims need to understand that there is an unfortunately high level of tolerating suicide bombings or violence against civilians. A Pew survey conducted in 2011 revealed that 13% of US Muslims thought suicide bombings or violence against civilian targets could be justified to defend Islam (rarely justified: 5%; sometimes justified: 7%; often justified: 1%). The Pew survey compared the results to those obtained from surveying Muslims in Pakistan, of whom only 7% felt that such violence could be justified in the name of Islam. Sadly, this degree of acceptance of suicide bombings or violence against civilians among US Muslims has not budged since 2007. This suggests that there is a disconnect between US Muslim organizations (which categorically condemn all attacks against civilians) and the US Muslim community.

Even though the 13% represent a small minority within the larger US Muslim community, they might be the ones who are most likely to be radicalized and it is thus important to understand what motivates them to endorse suicide bombings and violence against civilians. One hypothesis that can be explored is whether the Muslim self-perception of collective victimhood may contribute to their willingness to endorse violence. During the

past 15 years that I have lived in the US, I have noticed that in Friday sermons (khutbahs), discussions, lectures, articles and books, American Muslims often perceive themselves as collective victims. Khutbahs routinely end with prayers for people in need, but in my experience, there is a rather one-sided portrayal of the global Muslim community as victims - khateeb (khateeb = person who gives the Muslim Friday sermon or khutbah) frequently mention the plight of Muslims who are oppressed and persecuted in regions such as Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir or more recently, Burma. However, there is little mention of prayers for victims in situations where Muslims are the primary perpetrators, such as is the case when Sunni Muslims murder Shia or Ahmadiyya in Pakistan, or when they kill or persecute Christians, Jews or atheists. The buzzword "Islam ophobia", which is not really a phobia in the psychiatric sense, is frequently used to depict Muslims as victims. There are many cases of anti-Muslim hate speech and discrimination, but the haphazard use of "Islam ophobia" to bludgeon legitimate criticisms of Muslims or Islam is rendering this term useless. An exaggerated "Islam ophobia" view of the world also perpetuates the one-sided portrayal of Muslims as victims instead of promoting a more balanced view, one which would also include some discussion of anti-Western hostility that is found among Muslims ("Occidentophobia", incidentally is also not a true "phobia").

Is there any evidence that such a sense of collective victimhood could affect one's moral judgment? A remarkable study conducted by the social psychologists Michael Wohl and Nyla Branscombe lends credence to this idea. In a paper entitled "Remembering historical victimization: Collective guilt for current in group transgressions" published 2008 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Wohl and Branscombe examined the acceptance of Israeli acts of violence against Palestinians by Jewish Canadians. Using a web-based questionnaire, they surveyed Jewish Canadians in two different conditions, one which included showing the participants a website that reminded them of the Holocaust and the suffering of Jews and one condition in which participants just saw a neutral website. Importantly, participants who were reminded of the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust (prior to answering the questions) experienced significantly less guilt about Israeli actions against Palestinians. In a different set of experiments, Wohl and Branscombe then asked Americans how they felt about the harm inflicted by American troops on Iraqis. The American participants felt far less guilt regarding the American attacks, when the participants were reminded of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Interestingly, they also felt less guilt about the Iraq war when they were reminded of the Pearl Harbor attack. This suggested that it was not a causal link between September 11, 2001 and Iraq that had made them endorse American

violence, but merely the sense of collective victimization - independent of whether the perpetrators were the Japanese military or Muslim terrorists.

Considering these data, it might be important to study whether Muslims who are continuously reminded of historical or ongoing collective victimization - being victims of "Islamophobia" or of military actions in Palestine, Kashmir or Chechnya - could promote a justification for violent acts, quite similar to the participants studied by Wohl and Branscombe. Conversely, a more balanced and realistic view of history and current affairs which would depict Muslims as both, victims and perpetrators might lower the likelihood of Muslims endorsing violence.

On the Friday after the Boston Marathon bombings, prior to heading to the Friday sermon, I wondered whether the newly disclosed information that the bombers were US based Muslims would help promote a process of soul searching in the American Muslim community. Unfortunately, the twitter feed of one of the most popular English-language Muslim blogs, *MuslimMatters.org*, known for its uberconservative or right-wing ideas, did not suggest that this would occur. Some of its tweets and re-tweets on Friday morning suggested an all-too-familiar reaction of American Muslims. The religion of the Tsarnaev brothers was supposedly not relevant and had no bearing on the attacks; "only the perpetrator is responsible for the crime"; "If it wasn't you, then don't feel guilty. Do not take the burden of others upon your shoulders when they are wrongfully placed there"; and there were tweets about how Muslims might need to be vigilant about potential "Islamophobic" backlashes: "Please contact your local CAIR chapter if you experience any type of violence as a result of the tragedy in Boston: cair.com."

The idea that somehow "only the perpetrator is responsible for the crime" is puzzling since we routinely look at context of a crime. When Adam Lanza went on a shooting rampage, murdering children and terrorizing an elementary school, American society did not just respond with "only the perpetrator is responsible for the crime". There was an extensive effort made to re-evaluate gun laws and the mental healthcare system, and there was a general shift in the public opinion on gun control. It may be important to clarify the difference between "blame" and "responsibility". As a society, we should take responsibility to help each other and care for each other, and when we fail to do so, there is no shame in taking responsibility for that failure. That does not necessarily mean that we are all to "blame" for the acts committed by the Tsarnaev brothers or by Adam Lanza. Also, there is no need to expect that only Muslims have a responsibility to act in response to the Tsarnaev crimes. One should explore all the factors that resulted in the tragedy, such as failures of law enforcement

to detect the planned plot, addressing how they accessed the weapons and training that enabled them to commit their crimes or whether there had been warning signs that could have alerted family members, friends and colleagues. Muslim soul-searching is just part of the greater soul-searching process that involves society-at-large in response to the tragedy.

As I headed towards our Friday khutbah in Chicago, I wondered whether the khateeb would broach this difficult subject. The first part of the khutbah was about Moses and David, and how these two prophets should be our role models because they exemplified steadfastness in their faith, gratitude and prayer, thanking God even under most difficult circumstances. The second part of the khutbah specifically addressed the Boston bombings. The khateeb strongly condemned the terror attacks, and said that Muslims are never allowed to kill innocent civilians. He then explained the horrors of the Chechnyan war and how Muslims suffered at the hands of the Soviet and Russian military. However, instead of an analysis and introspection addressing how we could help reduce the recurrence of such acts, the khateeb indicated that he wanted to mention one other event in this context. He said that after the Boston attacks, an interfaith service had been planned and that the initially proposed Muslim representative had been vetoed by some members of the Boston community. The objection to this particular choice stemmed from the suggested imam's alleged ties to Islamist groups. A different Muslim representative was then chosen for the Interfaith service. Our khateeb then made a rather bizarre statement in a defiant tone and said that Muslims should choose their own leaders instead of allowing "Zionists" to make decisions for the Muslim community! Rather than look in the mirror and think about potential reasons for why some US Muslims justify violence with religion, Muslims were again being portrayed as victims of alleged "Zionists". The promising first part of the khutbah had focused on Moses and David and emphasized the shared Abrahamic traditions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, but the same khutbah had ended with the spreading of unnecessary conspiracy theories and regurgitating the image of the victimized Muslims. I left the khutbah with a heavy heart.

In the subsequent days, I observed how Muslims attempted to downplay the Muslim connection of the Tsarnaev brothers but I also saw how right-wing, anti-Muslim American groups began asking for massive profiling of Muslims merely based on their faith or ethnicity. We need to move beyond the two extremes - the one-sided portrayal by anti-Muslim hate-mongers of Muslims as purely evil perpetrators and the equally one-sided portrayal of Muslims as perpetual victims. We can then achieve a balanced and honest view of the role of Muslims in American society with a realistic and equitable distribution of responsibilities and expectations.

As with most unfathomable crimes, there are probably many factors that come together, there is no one single all-explanatory cause. The vast majority of supporters of far-right ideology do not go on shooting rampages like the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik did. The vast majority of homes containing an arsenal of guns do not give rise to child murderers such as Adam Lanza. The vast majority of Muslims who watch Islamist Youtube videos do not commit terrorist attacks. In all of these cases, we have to carefully analyze the risk factors that lead to the tragedies and work together to reduce the risk of recurrences. I do not want to live in a libertarian heaven with dormant "guilt neurons", where everyone is exclusively responsible for their own actions and where we can expediently shrug off any responsibility for the suffering of fellow humans or for the crimes committed by others. The strength of a society depends on the willingness of its members to engage in introspection and shoulder responsibilities.

Note: A brief excerpt of this article was first published in German as "Die Ewigen Opfer" on the blog of the German Progressive Muslim Forum- Muslima Aktiv.

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